

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT OBAMA
ON BURMA

Grand Hyatt
Bali, Indonesia

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good afternoon, everybody. Throughout my administration -- and throughout this trip -- I've underscored America's commitment to the Asia Pacific region, but also I've underscored America's commitment to the future of human rights in the region. Today I'm announcing an important step forward in our efforts to move forward on both these fronts.

For decades, Americans have been deeply concerned about the denial of basic human rights for the Burmese people. The persecution of democratic reformers, the brutality shown towards ethnic minorities, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few military leaders has challenged our conscience, and isolated Burma from the United States and much of the world.

However, we have always had a profound respect for the people of Burma, and the promise of their country -- a country with a rich history, at the crossroads of East and West; a people with a quiet dignity and extraordinary potential. For many years, both the promise and the persecution of the Burmese people has been symbolized by Aung San Suu Kyi. As the daughter of Burma's founding father, and a fierce advocate for her fellow citizens, she's endured prison and house arrest, just as so many Burmese have endured repression.

Yet after years of darkness, we've seen flickers of progress in these last several weeks. President Thein Sein and the Burmese Parliament have taken important steps on the path toward reform. A dialogue between the government and Aung San Suu Kyi has begun. The government has released some political prisoners. Media restrictions have been relaxed. And legislation has been approved that could open the political environment. So, taken together, these are the most important steps toward reform in Burma that we've seen in years.

Of course, there's far more to be done. We remain concerned about Burma's closed political system, its treatment of minorities and holding of political prisoners, and its relationship with North Korea. But we want to seize what could be an historic opportunity for progress, and make it clear that if Burma continues to travel down the road of democratic reform, it can forge a new relationship with the United States of America.

Last night, I spoke to Aung San Suu Kyi, directly, and confirmed that she supports American engagement to move this process forward. So today, I've asked Secretary Hillary Clinton to go to Burma. She will be the first American Secretary of State to travel to the country in over half a century, and she will explore whether the United States can empower a positive transition in Burma and begin a new chapter between our countries.

That possibility will depend upon the Burmese government taking more concrete action. If Burma fails to move down the path of reform, it will continue to face sanctions and isolation. But if it seizes this moment, then reconciliation can prevail, and millions of people may get the chance to live with a greater measure of freedom, prosperity, and dignity. And that possibility is too important to ignore.

Later today I'll reinforce these messages in America's meeting with ASEAN -- including with President Thein Shein. Meanwhile, when she travels to Nay Pyi Taw and Rangoon, Hillary will have the chance to deliver that message to the government, to civil society, and to democratic activists like Aung San Suu Kyi.

Again, there's more that needs to be done to pursue the future that the Burmese people deserve -- a future of reconciliation and renewal. But today, we've decided to take this step to respond to the positive developments in Burma and to clearly demonstrate America's commitment to the future of an extraordinary country, a courageous people, and universal values.

Thank you very much.